United Nations E/CN.17/2000/18

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
13 April 2000

Original: English

Commission on Sustainable Development
Eighth session
24 April-5 May 2000

Review of the ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources

Note by the Secretary-General

1. At its sixth session, the Commission on Sustainable Development recognized the important tasks for United Nations agencies and programmes and other international bodies in helping developing countries to implement their integrated water resources development, management and protection programmes and policies. The Commission also invited the ACC Subcommittee on Water Resources, as task manager for chapter 18 of Agenda 21, to accelerate the implementation of chapter 18 by considering action to, *inter alia*: (a) identify gaps or inconsistencies in the implementation of programmes of its constituent organizations by assessing the main features and effectiveness of the implementation of those activities and ensure that the mainstreaming of gender perspectives is appropriately included; (b) increase efficiency in programme delivery and possibilities for joint programming; and (c) explore the potential of cooperative arrangements and, where appropriate, take into account the experience gained in existing programmes in the United Nations system.

2. In its decision 6/1, of which the Economic and Social Council took note in its decision 1998/217, the Commission also invited the Secretary-General to submit a report to it prior to its eighth session on progress of the Subcommittee, as task manager of chapter 18 of Agenda 21, in the activities mentioned above.[1]

3. In response to that request, at its nineteenth session, in 1998, the Subcommittee decided to obtain the services of an independent Consultant to assist it in reviewing its methods of work, and thus also to contribute to the preparation of the report of the Secretary-General mentioned above.[2] It was also agreed that the Consultant would (a) carry out an analysis to identify significant gaps, overlaps and inconsistencies in current programmes, based on relevant documents and self-assessments from Subcommittee member organizations and evaluation interviews by phone, mail or direct contact; (b) provide recommendations on options to increase programme efficiency and joint programming among Subcommittee member organizations; (c) recommend ways in which the Subcommittee could enhance cooperation with institutions outside the United Nations system engaged in significant work in the field of water resources, such as the Global Water Partnership, the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council and the World Water Council; and (d) take into account in the analysis and recommendations the relevant experience gained in existing programmes of the United Nations system, including efforts to mainstream appropriate gender perspectives.

4. At its nineteenth session, the Subcommittee also agreed that in order to assist the Subcommittee in strengthening its ability to carry out the functions entrusted to it by the Inter-Agency Committee on

00-39044 (E) 190400

Sustainable Development (IACSD), including the implementation of recommendations arising from the sixth session of the Commission, the Consultant would also (a) analyse the current procedures, methods of work and outputs of the Subcommittee in relation to the terms of reference and to methods of operation of other ACC subcommittees, in particular the Subcommittee on Nutrition and the Subcommittee on Oceans and Coastal Areas; (b) examine options to improve the Subcommittee's communication with both water sector stakeholders and delegations of United Nations Member States; and (c) recommend ways in which the Subcommittee could enhance its coordination role, improve the transparency and visibility of its work and accelerate the implementation of chapter 18 of Agenda 21.

5. At its twentieth session, held at Geneva from 4 to 8 October 1999, the Subcommittee examined the Consultant's first draft report. That report identified four possible options: (a) the status quo; (b) the improvement of the Subcommittee's procedures; (c) the improvement of procedures and establishment of new priorities, including proposals to obtain the necessary additional resources; and (d) abolition of the Subcommittee if other existing freshwater coordinating mechanisms were considered. Given that options (a) and (d) were generally rejected by the Subcommittee, most of the ensuing discussion focused on the need to improve procedures.

6. Members of the Subcommittee agreed that in general, current procedures needed substantial improvement and that new priorities should be explored, as well as the identification of its core areas of activity, including the implementation of chapter 18 of Agenda 21 and the publication of a biennial *World Water Development Report*. It was also stressed that the Subcommittee should focus on its comparative advantages, such as (a) the moral authority of the United Nations system; (b) its access to Governments and intergovernmental processes; (c) its being an effective tool of advocacy; (d) its ability to define higher-level policies and issues; (e) its catalytic role in promoting global policies and guidelines; and (f) its unique role as a forum for discussion of differing views of various organizations of the United Nations system involved in the field of freshwater resources.

7. It was also agreed that the Subcommittee secretariat (whose services are currently provided by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs on a part-time basis) should be more proactive in the identification, promotion and coordination of specific issues, and that the agenda of future sessions should focus on a few strategic issues as opposed to a comprehensive agenda. In case it were decided that the secretariat needed to be reinforced to carry out more functions, a work plan for fund-raising should also be formulated with a view to obtaining additional financial and human resources. The Subcommittee recommended (as subsequently endorsed by IACSD) that its future sessions consist of a three-day core meeting, a one-day session for ad hoc workshops and an extra day for informal discussions with selected partners outside the United Nations system. In order to revitalize the three-day core meeting, interested Subcommittee member organizations would be requested to submit two-page summaries of current and future activities with a view to promoting inter-agency cooperation. It was further decided that all substantive agenda items in future sessions should be accompanied by concise issue papers.

8. The Subcommittee requested the Consultant to take account of the above-mentioned decisions in the preparation of the final draft of her report, which would be discussed during a special session of the Subcommittee to be held in March 2000, and to contribute to the preparation of the report of the Secretary-General to be submitted to the Commission at its eighth session.

9. The final report of the Consultant notes that in the absence of a United Nations central organization with overall responsibility for freshwater policy, the Subcommittee provides for internal system networking and contributes to the collection of information on United Nations activities and reports on broad issues related to water management. The report stresses that a strong case can be made that an intra-United Nations networking function is essential, but that case depends on the belief in the centrality of the United Nations system. The Consultant questions the value of reports prepared for intergovernmental bodies vis-à-vis the efforts made to prepare them, and concludes that it is essential that procedures be changed within the Subcommittee to permit the two core functions — system-wide networking and response to intergovernmental requests — to be performed more effectively.

10. The report of the Consultant also questions what the Subcommittee can do over and above those two

core functions to add value in a multi-player and multipolar world in which the goal to be achieved is a blend of sustainable, equitable policies and practices for integrated water resource management at the local and river basin levels. It emphasizes that the comparative advantage of the Subcommittee is its capacity to influence Government policies and programmes towards consistency with the standards and norms for freshwater management established by the United Nations system and other recommendations and outcomes of water or water-related conferences and meetings. The United Nations prestige and relationship of trust with Governments around the world are seen as useful for such leverage. According to the Consultant, the Subcommittee agenda should therefore be centred on those issues which go beyond the capacities of a single member organization and for which the ACC system is the most logical organizing entity. The report of the Consultant concludes that with different working methods and a reasonable increase in secretariat resources, the Subcommittee could accelerate the implementation of chapter 18 of Agenda 21.

11. In reviewing the Consultant's report at its special session, held at The Hague on 23 March 2000, the Subcommittee made a number of decisions for recommendation to IACSD regarding the seven main conclusions of the Consultant's report, which are listed below.

Conclusion 1

12. With or without new resources, the Subcommittee must change its working procedures to permit more effective networking at meetings and more efficient report production. Decisions which can be agreed via electronic mail should be adopted immediately. Specific issues on which immediate agreement might be sought include the organization of meetings, procedures for networking, procedures for transparency and membership. Only special issues on which no e-mail agreement were feasible should be dealt with in the annual Subcommittee session.

13. The Subcommittee at its special session authorized the Secretary to actively try to seek consensus on such issues, as appropriate.

Conclusion 2

14. Additional resources should be sought from the Commission and/or from donors; the case will be more persuasive if an agenda of activity has been adopted.

15. While the Subcommittee was informed that the Commission does not fund inter-agency activities, it was agreed that greater efforts should be made to seek additional resources from donors, particularly for concrete activities, such as the preparation of the forthcoming biennial United Nations *World Water Development Report*. Other issues will be examined during the next full session of the Subcommittee.

Conclusion 3

16. The Subcommittee must fulfil its undertaking to monitor national and international compliance with global policy frameworks, such as through the *World Water Development Report*.

17. This recommendation was adopted by the Subcommittee at its special session, after it was agreed that efforts would be made to monitor national and international implementation (as opposed to compliance), not only through the *World Water Development Report* but also through other activities related to the review of chapter 18 of Agenda 21.

Conclusion 4

18. The Subcommittee could agree that when issues need urgent action by all or some of its members, the Chairperson and the Secretary should take on a galvanizing role, after some internal consultations.

19. This recommendation was agreed in general terms by the Subcommittee at its special session; which also recommended that the Subcommittee request a member organization or a small group of organizations to take the lead on its behalf when such urgent issues are identified. This is actually what has happened in the case of recent Subcommittee initiatives in the areas of arsenic contamination of drinking water sources and the preparation of the initial groundwork and brochure for the *World Water Development Report*.

Conclusion 5

20. If the Subcommittee decides to proceed with an enhanced series of activities, two major steps are necessary: a discussion of the proposed new methods of work and an agenda of proposed topics. With regard

to the latter, the Consultant recommends that the Subcommittee work programme translate the global goals into the following mechanisms and tools, usable at the national level, primarily focused on Governments: (a) an international freshwater data collection manual; (b) procedures for signalling the existence of urgent freshwater situations; (c) a single authoritative source on drinking water standards; (d) standard guidelines on water quality; (e) construction, delivery and service standards for freshwater; (f) incorporation of techniques and reality of transparency and public consultation into public management practices; (g) an enabling environment for community participation in water issues; and (h) investment in peri-urban areas.

21. While the Subcommittee agreed that these and other topics would be more carefully examined at its next full session, member organizations expressed their willingness to take the lead in the following areas: (a) drinking water standards (World Health Organization); (b) water quality guidelines (the United Nations Environment Programme through the Global Freshwater Quality Monitoring Programme); (c) participation of civil society (United Nations Children's Fund); (d) preparation of the *World Water Development Report* (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization); and (e) gender (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)). With regard to the new methods of work proposed by the Consultant, the Subcommittee at its special session decided to examine such proposals in detail during its next full session.

Conclusion 6

22. A Subcommittee substantive session is needed to look at the following question: "What is the gender issue in freshwater and what are the successful examples of women being integrated into the management of water systems?"

23. The Subcommittee at its special session unanimously agreed with this recommendation, and noted that the relationship between freshwater and gender would in fact be addressed in an issue paper to be submitted by UNDP at the next session of the Subcommittee, when the Subcommittee would decide on preparations for the substantive session on gender issues. The date and venue of that substantive session will also be decided in the forthcoming session of the Subcommittee.

Conclusion 7

24. The regional commissions are recommended to meet to determine how their current output and activities could benefit from cross-regional exchange. Other Subcommittee member organizations would, of course, be welcome to attend but the central focus should be regional commission programmes and regional needs. In addition, every Subcommittee session should have time set for reports on what is happening within regions to work towards integrated water resources management, to resolve shared water management and to work towards river basin management structures.

25. The Subcommittee at its special session unanimously agreed on the important role of the regional commissions in the work of the Subcommittee. It recommended that the regional commissions and other interested member organizations meet immediately before Subcommittee sessions to discuss regional issues and activities, and that they report on the outcome of such meetings to the main session of the Subcommittee. A standing item to deal with regional issues should also be included in the agenda of future sessions, starting with the forthcoming session, to be held at the headquarters of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific at Bangkok from 16 to 20 October 2000. The standing agenda item for that session could focus on issues in the Asia and Pacific region. The Subcommittee also encouraged the regional commissions to organize workshops and other issue-oriented meetings focused on regional themes.

26. The final recommendations of the Subcommittee on the review of its methods of work will be submitted to the Administrative Committee on Coordination through IACSD. The final recommendations of the Subcommittee on the review of its methods of work can only be formally implemented after the official endorsement of IACSD.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1998, Supplement No. 9*, chap. I.B. (E/1998/29).

[2] According to the terms of reference of the consultancy — agreed during the nineteenth session of the Subcommittee — the Consultant was required to have (a) at least 15 years of international experience in

water resources planning, development and management; (b) thorough knowledge of the structure, operation and mandates of the organizations of the United Nations system; and (c) full understanding and familiarity with intergovernmental processes related to environment and development. Following an extensive search, the Secretary of the Subcommittee, in consultation with its Chairman, selected Margaret Catley Carlson, a respected authority in the field of freshwater resources whose international career, spanning 30 years at the highest levels of decision-making, has included positions as Chair of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council and Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF. The consultancy was carried out with financial support from the United Kingdom Department for International Development through its Water and Environmental Health in London and Loughborough Resource Centre.